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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at increasing the cultural impact which overseas programs can have on their participants. Too often such programs rely on cultural learning through haphazard and chance experiences. In its stead, a carefully organized program of cultural knowledge and experiences is advanced. Centered around a thematic approach to analysis of the foreign life style, the program involves face-to-face interviews and field experiences which bring students into direct contact with the foreign people and their social organization. Field assignments are accompanied by written guidelines to aid in the culture quest. Discussion-type seminars help sharpen understanding of the subject matter, and special sessions for teachers to design cultural materials for classroom use back home provide appropriate pedogogical application. (Author)

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AN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF CULTURE IN OVERSEAS PROGRAMS

by

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Overseas programs for Americans have reached a magnitude of almost staggering proportions. Latest figures of the Institute of International Education (1971) show a record-breaking number of 32,148 United States citizens who underwent study experiences abroad in 1970-71 in a total of 70 different countries of Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Far, Middle, and Near East, and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and other islands). Administered by American colleges and universities, foreign institutions, and a myriad of other organizations, these programs offer students an opportunity for residence in a foreign country along with a chance to enroll in an organized academic program.

Surface features

On the surface the generally offered study abroad program seems praiseworthy. It conjures up visions of the student mixing with the people of the host country, learning about new ways of life, and improving language skills; not a bad set of expectations by anyone's standards. How many of these ideals are actually realized, however, is something else to ponder.

There is no question about whether students do in fact interact with the foreign people and thus acquire cultural knowledge and language skill. Even the most introverted register some gain. But a look at the curricular organization of many programs leads one to suspect that a great deal of potential benefit is lost.

Chance experiences

Several study abroad programs offer special orientation sessions to smooth the student's transition from the native to the host culture.

Instruction of this type is obviously important for reducing culture shock. Beyond this stage, however, cultural learning is often left to chance. It may consist merely of haphazard and often unrelated experiences, which may be acceptable if the student is to live the rest of his life in the foreign country. It is questionable, however, in the context of a summer or at best an academic year abroad.

The student's use of the foreign language likewise may be tied to chance experiences. Although the student is provided language practice through the classroom, and in some instances, through residence with private families, he is left largely to his own initiative for any further language contact. For many students, this means transfer to the native language.

It is important to recognize that even the most outgoing student suffers under a program which relies on culture and language learning through chance experiences. How many foreign language professors have returned from overseas and only then have become inquisitive about certain aspects of culture which never occurred to them while in the foreign setting? Are we not, therefore, asking too much of the culturally-unsophisticated student by expecting him to know what to look for while abroad? Because of the vastness of cultural ways, he needs some organization to understand how to systematically study a culture. And in order not to overlook the vital language component of the overseas experience, some means must be devised to complement the student's cultural learning with enforced oral language immersion.

Apprehension in organizing

University personnel responsible for organizing a program of this order may react apprehensively out of fear of their limitations in analyzing the foreign culture. This kind of thinking has been around a long time and has tended to squelch cultural instruction in colleges and universities. To counteract it, inquiry might be made as to what it means to "know" a culture? Does one "know" his own? In a sense he does, while in another sense he does not. Being born and raised in a given culture gives one the ability to function in accord with the demands of that culture. This person knows the culture. His knowledge is one of the best kind--a behavioral one in which he responds appropriately and automatically to stimuli in either attitude or action. He may not know the culture, however, in terms of organizing his isolated behaviors into thematic wholes. If he has not taken this basic step, he is likely to encounter difficulties in knowing how to begin analyzing the foreign life style.

Organizing cultural knowledge

Several authors have contributed ideas which can start one thinking about organizing cultural phenomena. Morain (1968) cites a number of sources in the Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, Volume 2. Likewise the AATSP—sponsored packet on the Mexican life cycle written by Savaiano and Arciandia (1968), and Gorden's study of American Guests in Colombian Homes provide provocative ideas for the organizing process. Of a more comprehensive scope is Murdock's work (1945) which offers a detailed organization of categories on life styles (e.g., food,

the family, housing, etc.), a breakdown of themes into sub-categories (e.g., food: acquisition, kinds, serving, consumption) as well as hints which encourage the imagination towards even further breakdown (e.g., acquisition of food: places, atmosphere, frequency, selling techniques, including bargaining, beliefs about certain kinds of foods, beliefs about canned and frozen foods, wrapping and preparation for carrying food home, etc.).

How can this mass of material be put to use so that an organized culture component can be included in the study abroad curriculum? The first step to be suggested is to make a list of broad categories which deal with human life. These themes can then be broken down into sub-categories to facilitate clearer organization of the material. (Reference sources cited earlier will render invaluable help for these first two steps.) This can be followed by a list of questions pertaining to each sub-theme. Although reference materials will suggest some useful questions, the bulk of this task is left to the individual professor. Here is where behavioral knowledge of one's own culture together with whatever degree of knowledge possessed on the foreign life style come into play. An analysis of American culture on the family unit, for example, will yield sub-categories and questions which are applicable to a study of the family of the target culture as well. A sample analysis is offered below to serve as an example of sub-categories and the kinds of questions which can be asked.

A. Courtship and Marriage

1. What are common methods of courting?

2. How are marriage negotiations made?

3. What is the idea behind an engagement period? What is the length of the period?
4. What types of symbols (e.g., rings) are used for the engagement as well as for the marriage?
5. What kinds of special activities (e.g., showers, bachelor dinners) are held in honor of the engaged couple? What takes place during these activities?
6. What ideas are held about the wedding ceremony (e.g., sacred)?
7. What is the place of the wedding ceremony? How is it decorated?
8. Who are the participants in the ceremony (e.g., priest, wedding party, guests)?
9. What constitutes the ceremony?
10. Is there a reception? What is it like and where is it held? Who are the guests?
11. Are gifts given? To whom? How are they given? When are they given?
12. What verbal expressions are commonly used to congratulate the couple?
13. What actions are appropriate (i.e., handshaking, hugging, kissing)? Are these different for male and female guests and for the bride and groom?
14. What kinds of post-marriage activities (e.g., dinners, honeymoon) are there?

B. Relations between husband and wife

1. Who is the authority figure? How do both spouses feel about this relationship?
2. What qualities are desired in a spouse?
3. What ideas are held on the purpose of marriage?
4. What ideas are held on the permanency of marriage? Are divorces possible? If so, what is involved in getting one? How is a divorcee looked upon by friends and neighbors?
5. What are considered the rights and privileges of each marriage partner?

C. Relations between parents and children

1. What areas of authority belong to each spouse in terms of child raising?
2. What division of responsibility is made in caring for the children (e.g., playing with them, disciplining work, tasks)?
3. What types of play do parents engage in with their children?
4. What types of lullabies and songs do parents sing with their children?
5. What form does discipline take?
6. What type of family activities exist? What is their frequency?
7. Do families have picnic outings? When and where are picnics held? What kind of food and drink is taken? What non-food items are taken (e.g., table cloth, portable radio)? What

is appropriate attire (e.g., suit and tie)?

8. What special privileges are given to either male or female children? Why?
9. What special ceremonies are there for infants (e.g., dedication, baptism)? Who attends these ceremonies?
10. What special ceremonies or events are there for older children?
11. What work tasks are assigned to children in the home?
12. What is characteristic of the father-son relationship, of the father-daughter relationship (e.g., distant, respectful, protective, etc.)?
13. How does the mother's relationship with her sons and daughters differ from that between her husband and her children (e.g., extreme closeness with one of the sexes, preparation of sons for dominance and independence, etc.)?

D. Relations between siblings

Here characteristic attitudes and dealings can be investigated between male-male, female-female, and male-female relationships (e.g., extremely close relationships between sisters, great respect given the eldest, brother's protectiveness of sisters, etc.)

This type of inquiry will likely produce several hundred questions which can serve as a foundation for teaching the foreign culture. An analysis based solely on organization of common facets of the native culture, however, will likely omit important aspects of the target culture. Therefore, the list will need to be expanded with questions

peculiar to the foreign setting. For example, under the picnic theme (Part C, item 7), based on analysis of American culture, a question on transportation would most likely be overlooked. It is taken for granted that Americans will drive to their picnics. Many Europeans, on the other hand, do not own automobiles and consequently will be concerned about bus or train schedules. Awareness of this characteristic of the foreign culture, therefore, will cuase a question to be added on transportation to the picnic site.

Organizing the course

Organization of the material by means of the steps suggested above makes sense only if there is a willingness on the part of the professor to depart from traditional methods of teaching. A list of questions on French, German, or Spanish customs, for example, will be of little value in the context of a lecture session. Furthermore, under the traditional lecture scheme there is no insurance that students will be led to interact with the native people and thereby obtain language practice and first-hand experience with desired facets of the culture. The point to be made here, then, is that the questions are not designed for use by the professor but rather by the student. This is done by means of providing each student with dittoed sheets of the questions which will direct him to seek opinions from native persons. A requirement that the student interview several persons, e.g., three per item, will insure more comprehensive findings as well as provide greater opportunity for oral language practice. An added advantage of this technique is the rapport and good will which it helps create

as the foreign host sees Americans interested in learning about his customs.

Somewhat different from cultural learning through the inquiry method is the student's actual participation in some culturally-loaded situation which differs markedly from its American counterpart. Several of these situations can be identified for the student to experience personally. Spanish students might be asked to attend a number of movie theatres. In Spain this would require first-hand observation and involvement as follows: (1) checking the movie section (cartelera) in the newspaper to learn the hours of the film showing (this will also require the student to become familiar with the difference between premier showings--de estreno---and re-runs--de sesión continua--as well as to learn about the kind of people who frequent each type); (2) having to make a decision at the ticket booth whether to sit on the main floor (butaca) or in one of the balconies (platea and galería) and learning that tickets for each of the areas are priced differently; (3) selecting the seat desired from a peg board of asientos numerados at the ticket booth; (4) having a refreshment (e.g., cognac, coffee, soft drink) at the bar in the lobby while waiting for the movie to begin; (5) tipping the usher for escorting you to your seat; and, (6) becoming familiar with distinctive features of the Spanish film in contrast with Hollywood productions.

Questioning students who returned from a study experience in Spain, I found that a large percentage of them never went to a Spanish movie theatre, while those who did attend failed to notice several of its unique features. Looking in retrospect, I wonder how much they

missed in terms of understanding the uniqueness of other mass media (e.g., radio, television, newspapers).

It seems important, therefore, that structure be given to the cultural component of the overseas program which will insure students' direct participation in various aspects of daily life in the target culture. Cultural experiences which are deemed valuable must not be left to chance nor to the whim of the student.

All that is involved in going to a movie, which happens to represent one of the most popular pastimes of Spain, may very well be one of these important experiences. How is this so? Among the Spanish students queried who were found to have attended a movie abroad, some never realized that tipping the usher was an expected custom, while others gave an inappropriate tip of just one or two pesetas, all of which resulted in the disgust of the usher. (A one or two peseta tip would be similar to tipping with pennies in the United States.) This serves as one small example of how a person simply out of ignorance of what is expected fails to function in accord with the demands of the society. Gorden, in his study on American Guests in Colombian Homes, explains a wide variety of serious interpersonal problems stemming from lack of understanding cultural ways. Likewise, he points out how misunderstandings often cause a person to draw basic conclusions about the other's character, which is all the more reason for understanding the behaviors which the host culture demands.

Having identified aspects of the culture intended for students to experience, we must consider formulating instructions which will insure

the desired cultural learning. It has been pointed out that several students failed to notice a number of significant features of the Spanish movie theatre. Written guidelines, therefore, might accompany each assignment to call attention to key aspects to be observed or experienced. For example, if a student is not interested in a refreshment while in the movie, he is likely to miss the fact that Spanish movie houses serve liquor in their lobbies. The guidelines, therefore, might include instructions for the student to: (1) stop at the bar in the lobby; (2) identify the kinds of drinks being served; (3) distinguish how the selection differs from that of the refreshment stand in an American movie; (4) observe if people stay at the bar with their drinks, or if they take them to their seats; (5) speculate why they do this.

A part of the written guidelines might also tell the student what is expected of him in certain situations. As mentioned earlier, some students are likely to overlook the custom of tipping the usher, while others may give an inappropriate amount. A statement might be included in the guidelines to eliminate these cultural infractions.

At the risk of carrying the theme too far, I would like to point out the obvious linguistic benefit in sending study abroad participants to movie theatres as part of their program requirements. In fact, the whole area of development of oral language skills can extend to the stage, television, and radio as well. It seems to me that the imaginative study abroad curriculum will not merely duplicate courses which can be taken at home. Summer programs abroad for Spanish students, for example, which are composed of literature courses on the

Golden Age, Nineteenth Century Drama, and the Generation of 1898 hardly seem to take any special advantage of the unique learning experiences offered by the foreign setting. When inclusion of a literature offering is desirable, current literary pieces being produced on the stage and on television and radio would seem to make more sense in terms of both cultural learning and language development. In Germany, for example, where the radio play has evolved into an art form of significant literary merit, it seems good sense to assign students to listen to these productions as a part of their course requirements.

The foregoing discussion which has leaned heavily towards contemporary and anthropological-type culture is not intended to suggest that culture of a more traditional nature (often called "Capital C" culture) is unimportant. The target civilization and its great literature should form a part of every serious student's knowledge. They must not, however, be allowed to supplant other approaches towards understanding the daily life style of the culture. Learning about the architecture of a cathedral may be important, but so is knowing the daily patterns of living of the French, German, or Spanish family.

The class session

Armed with copious pages of information, the student who has immersed himself in the culture by means of the inquiry method as well as by direct participation is now ready to share his findings with fellow students and professors. Discussion-type seminars lend themselves to this kind of approach. To facilitate making judgments on the mass of ideas brought to the classroom, a native sociologist

or anthropologist may work with the professor-in-charge in order to differentiate between cultural patterns of the population in general and practices which deviate from the norm. An additional advantage of these sessions is the opportunity for students to recount situations which they themselves have been experiencing and to which they feel their responses were inadequate or to which they did not know how to respond at all.

Another class activity, which relates more particularly to program participants who are teachers, is the design of cultural materials for classroom use back home. Without the inclusion of this pedagogical element, the value of the culture program would be seriously curtailed for this group of students. The following section, therefore, is devoted to a discussion on how the material might be applied to teaching culture in the foreign language classroom.

Applying the material for teaching

Perhaps the most common way in which a teacher shares cultural insights with his foreign language class is through cultural asides. Consisting of off-the-cuff remarks, this technique is used at one time or another by all teachers. It deals almost exclusively, however, with bits and pieces of information which often come spontaneously to the teacher's mind, as contrasted with a focus on planned categories which lend towards more comprehensive wholes. The latter involves consideration of a number of teaching techniques which are described in detail by Meade (1972).

1. Cultural assimilator. A brief description of certain misunderstandings between people of different cultural backgrounds followed by multiple choice questions on the reasons for the misunderstandings. Explanations pertaining to the answers (both right and wrong) are given to further the student's understanding of the cultural problems.
2. Mini-drama. A dramatization of a situation in which misunderstandings result among members of two different cultures. Students are given roles to play to give them a better idea of the feelings behind each person's point of view.
3. Culture capsule. A short lecture presentation (e.g., five minutes) on some cultural theme followed by class discussion on a point of contrast between the two cultures.
4. Culture cluster. A uniting of several culture capsules into a larger theme which culminates in student simulation. Meade (1972) suggests how this might be done with the larger theme of the French country wedding which is based on four culture capsules: "The Civil Ceremony," "The Religious Ceremony," "The Wedding Dinner," and "Differences Between Country and City Weddings." The simulation of these activities is seen to be valuable for gaining "an almost first-hand understanding of basic concepts about French society . . . ."

A fifth device to be added to the list of techniques for teaching culture is the audio-motor unit of Elkins, et. al. (1972). Designed to teach cultural understanding by means of the interplay of auditory, visual, and motor skills, the strategy involves a series of oral commands

which are acted out by teacher and students. This physical activity helps link culture to language in a way which makes the cultural phenomena immediately obvious.

Referring to these kinds of techniques, teachers can proceed to make teaching packets with information they have collected through their culture assignments abroad. Thus, teachers will have available a number of stimulating approaches to the teaching of culture in their foreign language classrooms.

Conclusion

Learning about the foreign culture in an overseas program need not be a haphazard and chance experience. Structure can be given a program to insure student immersion in the culture through specific observation and participation. A plan is presented in this paper which illustrates how to identify cultural phenomena which can constitute the body of material to be studied. At the same time a proposal is offered for applying the material through field experiences, personal interviews with native people, and follow-up seminars. An additional element is suggested for training teachers in techniques of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom.

The proposed program offers cultural learning which is measurable in accord with a body of definable material and which specifies precise learning tasks. These are characteristics which are expected to form a part of any serious approach to learning. There is no reason why they should not be included in the study of culture.

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